

About this project

The portal

[This research portal](#) provides access to the 5892 archive files in the Biennale de Paris (1959-1985), actually held at the Archives de la critique d'art in Rennes (collection of the INHA) and at the Bibliothèque Kandinsky (MNAM-CCI – Centre Pompidou) à Paris. It allows the users to cross-reference data from both archival funds, to carry out targeted requests on the 5801 artists related to the files, to sort and visualise data according to a series of filters, as well as to produce statistics.

This portal is part of the research programme « [1959-1985, au prisme de la Biennale de Paris](#) » conducted from 2017 to 2021 at the Institut national d'histoire de l'art (INHA), under the direction of Elitza Dulguerova, in partnership with the Archives de la critique d'art, the Bibliothèque Kandinsky and the Institut national de l'audiovisuel. The aim of this international research project was twofold: 1° to consider the role of the Paris Biennial in the history of contemporary art and its institutions, through the organisation of seminars, of an exhibition, and through academic publications, and 2° to facilitate the access to the archival documents that preserve its memory. (For further details, see [To go further](#) below).

Held in the French capital between 1959 and 1985, the International Biennial of Young Artists, known as the « Paris Biennial », was one of the first major international events focused on contemporary art. During its 13 editions, it displayed the works of more than five thousand artists from 74 different countries working in a variety of art modes. Although it was a recurrent event, its form and mission would change significantly throughout its existence, during a period of time that was both that of the Cold War, and a time of important artistic, social, institutional, political and geopolitical transformations.

The research portal allows the users to filter the data pertaining to the participations of artists (individuals or groups) during the Biennale's lifetime through a series of criteria that stem both from the specific organisation of the event and from the archival description of the two collections.

The classification adopted here allows requests by: the name, the gender and the age of the artist, the country of participation, the year of participation, the type of artist (individual or group) and the type of participation (personal or collective), the category of creation, the place of conservation and the call number of the files of each institution. A specific filter (type of biennial) limits the search to the sole participants of the Architecture Biennials held within the framework of the Paris Biennial from 1980 to 1985. For more details on filters, please see below.

Warning: Due to its complex organisation, the Paris Biennial is not immune to arbitrariness or chance. The same applies to its documentary archives. Thus, users may find discrepancies between the information given in the catalogues of its various editions and that kept in the participation files in the archives (last-minute additions after the catalogue was printed, errors in the catalogues, etc.) This portal gives precedence to data from the archives.

What remains outside its scope

This finding aid focuses on the actual participation of the artists without going as far as the title of the works exhibited, as this information is not systematically indicated or indexed. Scholars might sometimes find it in the descriptions of the records in the online catalogues of the two partner's organisations (Archives de la critique d'art et Bibliothèque Kandinsky).

Several other types of documents remain as well beyond the scope of this research portal.

It is therefore advisable to consult the [research tool of the Archives de la critique d'art](#) for: the documents related to the administration and the accounting of the Paris Biennial ; the official correspondence; the files of rejected artists; the sound or audio-visual archives; the installation views (with the exception of those that are associated with the artists' participation files) ; [the press review of the Biennale](#) for the period from 1959 to 1985 (save 1961).

As for the collection held at the Bibliothèque Kandinsky, it is advisable to refer to the [its own finding aid](#) in order to consult certain administrative documents; the correspondence held outside of the artists' files; the files of rejected artists; the curatorial documentation and [the documentary files](#), which contain press cuttings (including the year 1961) and other ephemera.

Both institutions hold additional documents related to the Paris Biennial in other archival and printed collections (see [To go further](#) below).

Some other external archives also hold relevant sets of documents (see [To go further](#) below).

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Filters

As the archival description of the artists' files in the two archival collections was not identical, a partial harmonisation was carried out a posteriori as part of the research programme "1959-1985, au prisme de la Biennale de Paris" in order to create this portal. As a result of this endeavour, the portal proposes to filter the data according to the following criteria:

Artist

This filter indexes by name the 5043 artists included in the participation files. Here, the term "artist" may refer both to an individual or to a group of artists who display works collectively.

The spelling of the proper names of the foreign participants in the Paris Biennial has been unified according to the rules of transcription and the usage in force in France at the time of publication of this portal.

Gender

This filter is helpful in looking at the part of male and female artists in the Paris Biennial. The archival description of the documents does not include this kind of data. It has been added here to provide additional research options. It should therefore be noted that gender was in no way a selection criterion for the participation of artists in the Paris Biennial.

This filter refers to the gender identity of the participants as indicated on the entry forms and in the exhibition catalogues.

Thus, for example, El Kazovszkij, a Hungarian artist who lived and created under a male identity despite being born a woman, is shown here as a male artist, as indicated in the 1982 catalogue.

Age

The "age" filter makes it possible to follow the change of age averages according to years, countries or disciplines. For twelve editions, from 1959 to 1983, the Paris Biennial claimed to be a platform of display for young, not yet established artists aged between 20 and 35. It abandoned this criterion in the "New Biennale" of 1985, which proved to be its last edition.

The age filter allows to see that the age rule could be circumvented on some occasions, e.g. in the case of collective entries or in the Architecture Biennials.

Country

The difference between nationality and country of residence is an issue that runs through the history of the Paris Biennale and often takes a political turn. Emigrant artists, for instance, could represent different countries outside their country of origin and even change their flag from one edition to the next. On several occasions, the French section would include artists of many different nationalities. The requests by 'country' must therefore be cross-referenced with other criteria and their results should be cautiously examined.

Here, the "country" filter can give information on :

- the country represented at the Biennial (in most cases; relevant for the data coming from the Archives de la critique d'art);
- the nationality of the artist (sometimes relevant for the data coming from the Bibliothèque Kandinsky);
- or both at the same time.

Some examples may shed light on this issue:

The Spanish painter Luis Feito took part in the French national selection in 1959, in accordance with the rule that welcomed any foreign artist residing in France for at least three years. In this portal, Feito's participation, like that of many international artists, is indexed by country to "France".

Similarly, during the experimental biennial of 1971, many artists from the international scene were presented by France without actually residing there. As a result, artists such as the British Victor Burgin, the German Hanne Darboven, the Americans Dan Graham and Adrian Piper, the Romanian Șerban Epure, and many others were classified under "France" in 1971.

The distinction between country of origin and country of participation is even more difficult to keep in the case of artists who changed their country of residence or had several nationalities (the Bulgarian and later American Christo participated for France in 1963).

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Year

This filter refers to year when a given edition took place.
It shows several years when an artist has participated in several editions.

Type of artist

This filter distinguishes between artists who present works on an individual basis, and groups of artists who present a collective work.

The "team works" (travaux d'équipe) and the artists' groups – sometimes already established, sometimes created on purpose for a given edition – are indeed a singular feature of the Paris Biennial, even if they remain less numerous than the individual participations.

Type of participation

This filter makes it possible to distinguish between artists who participate in their own name (personal participation) and those who join in a collective participation. The same person may have participated in different editions on a personal basis or as part of a collective.

NB: The finding aid allows these collective participations to be traced back in different ways:

- For data from the Archives de la critique d'art, either through the name of the group/team/collective or through the names of the artist members of a collective. Exception: for the year 1959, this data is accessible only through the names of the artist members, as the groups are not recorded as such in the archival documents.
- For the data from the Bibliothèque Kandinsky, mainly through the name of the group/team/collective.

Categories of creation

The Paris Biennial has welcomed various modes of creation and, over the years, it would classify them in various sections that would constantly undergo changes. As it is impossible to keep track of all the sections (the list would have matched the [impossible taxonomy](#) of Jorge Luis Borges' Investigations, commented on by Michel Foucault), we opted here for a "category" type thematic filter. The specific sections for each edition can be consulted in their catalogues.

Here, the "categories of creation" filter proposes generic categories that bring together the different sections into very broad sets. These categories should be considered as global axes of orientation allowing to roughly distinguish the different participations. In no way are they a precise description of the works by medium.

The four main categories remain close to the widely-accepted distinctions by discipline and usage:

- "Architecture," for the participation files relating to architecture or urban planning, including the Architecture Biennials ;
- "Film et video" [Film and Video], for all films, films on art or video works shown by ways of screening, and which have been the subject of a specific participation file;
- "Spectacle, Musique et Théâtre" [Performing Arts, Music and Theatre], for all works related to live performing arts: music (musical composition, concerts), theatre (theatrical decoration, stage design, theatrical shows). This category does not include sound works nor performance-based artworks from the 1970s and the 1980s, which rather pertain to the category of « Experimental and Mixed Practices ».
- "Arts". The "Arts" category includes by far the largest number of artistic practices shown at the Paris Biennial. It refers to proposals displayed mainly according to the codes and conventions of art museums.

For greater clarity, the "Arts" category is subdivided into ten subcategories to better grasp the type of work presented. The latter rely upon different sets of characteristics:

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A. TYPOLOGIES BY MEDIUM

- The five subcategories "Dessin" [Drawing], "Livres et arts graphiques" [Books and Graphic Arts], "Peinture" [Painting], "Photographie" [Photography] and "Sculpture" reflect the traditional classification by medium that was applied to the sections of several editions of the Paris Biennial. This taxonomy has been cross-referenced with the thematic classifications featured in the description of certain documents when no sections were indexed.
- The subcategory "Pratiques expérimentales et mixtes" [Experimental and Mixed Practices] refers to performance-based art forms (body art, sound or video performances), to various conceptual practices, as well as, more broadly, to practices stemming from the lineage of collage (happenings, environments, installations).
- The subcategory "Arts plastiques" has a special place in this taxonomy. In the archival documents, it refers mainly to works selected and presented in sections bearing this name in 1980, 1982 and 1985. That the organisers of the Biennial turned to such a generic category reveals both a certain refusal to partition contemporary art, and a certain level of dismay in the face of the broken barriers of the traditional descriptive categories which, since the 1970s, have proved to be relatively useless. In order to better understand the characteristics of the works grouped within these "Arts plastiques" sections, we have departed from the rule of resting upon the archival records, and have cross-referenced the data from the latter with the actual descriptions of the artworks in the catalogues of the 1980, 1982 and 1985 editions. This additional level of clarification, unique on the scale of this portal, offers a glimpse at the range of disciplines that compose the subcategory "Arts plastiques." It allows us to see that the generic term "Arts plastiques" conceals a return to traditional artistic practices in the 1980s, mostly painting and sculpture, more rarely drawings, mixed and experimental practices (mainly installations), and photography (NB: the latter appears in 1980 both in an eponymous section in its own right, and within the "Arts plastiques" section).

B. TYPOLOGIES SPECIFIC TO THE PARIS BIENNIAL

- The subcategory "Travaux d'équipe et de groupe" [Team and Group Works] refers to works produced within the sections "Team Works" (travaux d'équipe) and "Artists' Groups", which existed between 1959 and 1971, and which did not rely upon distinctions by medium.
- The subcategory "Groupements internationaux" [International Groupings] includes two particular sections formed on a geographical rather than artistic basis: the "Option 4" section, which brought together a group of international entries from traditional artistic disciplines within the framework of the experimental edition of 1971; and the uncommon "Latin America" section in the 1977 edition.
- The sub-category "Exposition collective" [Collective exhibition] corresponds to the collective exhibition Jeunes artistes à Paris held at the Musée Galliera in 1969. It gathered various works by international artists with no guiding theme or medium. Since the archival records for this event do not provide any specific information on artistic practices, this event has come to be considered as a section and category in its own right.

Type of biennial

This filter allows to single out the participations related to the three editions of the Architecture Biennial that was devised and directed by Jean Nouvel within the framework of the Paris Biennial in 1980, 1982 and 1985.

Place of consultation

This filter allows to limit the research to one of the places that preserve the archives of the Paris Biennial: the Archives de la critique d'art or the Bibliothèque Kandinsky. Even when this filter is not activated, it is still possible to differentiate their holdings by their different call numbers:

- "FR ACA BIENN for the Archives de la critique d'art ;
- "BDP" for the Bibliothèque Kandinsky.

Call number

This filter allows to search by the call number of a given archival document.

The two archive collections that gave rise to this portal

Les Archives de la critique d'art (ACA)

Located in Rennes, the Archives de la critique d'art collect, preserve and promote the writings of art critics whose work spans from the mid-20th century to nowadays. They hold one of the most important collections of writings on contemporary art in France. The [Biennale de Paris 1959-1985 collection](#) (INHA-Collection Archives de la critique d'art) spreads over seventy linear meters. It covers the entire period of existence of the event and includes, alongside the administrative archives, correspondence, participation files, iconographic, audio-visual and sound documents, as well as the press review for each edition of the biennale.

La Bibliothèque Kandinsky

The Bibliothèque Kandinsky is the documentation and research centre of the Musée national d'art moderne (Centre Pompidou). It houses a heritage collection of books, journals, archives, photographs, audio-visual documents and documentary files related to the collections of the MNAM and to contemporary art of the 20th and 21st centuries. Its [Biennale de Paris collection](#) holds more than a thousand files on artists who took part or applied for the Biennale's editions between 1973 and 1985.

To go further

- an [international seminar](#) held between 2017 and 2019. Its seventeen sessions brought together contributions from forty-six French and foreign speakers. The video recordings are available [online](#);
- an [experimental documentary exhibition](#), "A space for something else: the Paris Biennale, 1959-1985", Musée national d'art moderne - Centre Pompidou, permanent collections, rooms 2, 5 and 7, from 4 June 2021 to 31 January 2022, curated by Elitza Dulguerova, Mica Gherghescu, with the help of Federica Milano and the documental gaze of Franck Leibovici;
- an [edited collection of essays](#) that proposes for the first time more than thirty critical readings of this event: "La Biennale internationale des jeunes artistes. Paris, 1959-1985", edited by Elitza Dulguerova, Paris/Dijon, INHA/Les Presses du réel, 2023.
- further readings and other resources are available on the [blog](#) of the research project.

Documentary tools

In order to better grasp the holdings related to the Biennale de Paris in France, here is a list of the main institutions that preserve archives related to the event:

- Archives de la critique d'art, Rennes, [Fonds Biennale de Paris, 1959-1985](#) ; relevant documents can also be found in other related fonds (Dany Bloch, Georges Boudaille, Jean Clareboudt, Pierre Courcelles, Henry Galy-Carles, Gérard Gassiot-Talabot, Jean-Marc Poinot, Frank Popper, Michel Ragon, Pierre Restany...).
- Centre Pompidou/MNAM-CCI/Bibliothèque Kandinsky, [Fonds Biennale de Paris](#) and related fonds (Jean Fournier, André Malraux, Philippe Thomas, Harry Shunk and Shunk-Kender, Julien Alvard, Joseph Pichard, Marc Vaux; general photographic fonds; Centre Pompidou exhibition fonds). See the [Guide des documents textuels iconographiques hors fonds dédié](#) prepared by Julia Raymond.
- Archives diplomatiques du ministère de l'Europe des Affaires étrangères de La Courneuve (Diplomatic Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs): documents produced by the Association française d'action artistique and the Service des échanges artistiques concerning the origin and general organisation of the Paris Biennale and its first seven editions (1959-1971): see the [Guide des sources / Archives Diplomatiques / fonds relatifs à la Biennale de Paris](#), by Aurore Buffetaut.
- Archives nationales de Pierrefitte-sur-Seine. Documents from the Délégation Arts Plastiques of the cabinet of the Minister of Culture and Communication and the Direction des Musées de France and the Services de la création artistique. See the [Guide des sources, Archives nationales](#), by Eléa Le Gangneux; [the more specific list](#) of a few fonds relating to the purchases of artworks by the State, as well as the [Guide des sources relating to the collaboration between the Service de la Recherche de l'RTF/ORTF \(Research Department of the RTF/ORTF\) and the Biennale de Paris](#), by Guillaume Blanc

Resources

- Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine (IMEC). The [archives of](#) the graphic designer Pierre Faucheux that belong to the IMEC contain many important documents related to his activity as scenographer for the Paris Biennale between 1959 and 1969, to his coordination of the "Travaux d'équipe" (team works) section, and to his invention of multimedia device for museum display, the Cyclotone. See the [guide to the Pierre Faucheux collection](#) prepared by Elitza Dulguerova
- Institut national de l'audiovisuel. Documents from the "Radio" and "Television" collections, including sound and audio-visual programmes, in black and white or colour, containing interviews, reportages, concerts, performances and original sound works. See [the commented list of RTF/ORTF TV and radio broadcasts on the Biennale de Paris](#), prepared by Elitza Dulguerova, Federica Milano, Julia Raymond and reviewed by Catherine Gonnard, as well as [the inventory of documents on the relations between the Biennial and the RTF/ORTF](#), prepared by Guillaume Blanc.
- Bibliothèque nationale de France: site François-Mitterrand (a collection of ephemera, 1963-1985); Department Arts du spectacle (five factitious collections of press clippings on theatre, music and cinema during the Biennale's 1963 to 1973 editions). For further details, [see the research blog](#).

Archives related to the Paris Biennial can also be found in the private archives of former participants or collaborators, as well as in many institutions of the foreign countries that took part in the event. Depending on the country, the conservation of archives may be under the responsibility of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, a museum or centre for contemporary art, etc.

The Institut national d'histoire de l'art is a French public institution of scientific, cultural and professional character whose main mission is the advancement of scholarly research and international cooperation in the fields of art history and heritage studies. The Institute is run jointly by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research and the Ministry of Culture.

This portal is part of the INHA's research programme "[1959-1985, au prisme de la Biennale de Paris](#)". It is realised in close collaboration with the Archives de la critique d'art (Rennes) and the Bibliothèque Kandinsky (Musée national d'art moderne-Centre de création industrielle, Centre Pompidou).

Partnering institutions of the research program:

- [Archives de la critique d'art](#)
- [Bibliothèque Kandinsky](#) (Musée national d'art moderne-Centre de création industrielle, Centre Pompidou.)
- [Institut National de l'Audiovisuel](#)

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